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1991

# The Search for Captain Howdy

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*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Bray, Robert C., "The Search for Captain Howdy" (1991). *Honorees for Teaching Excellence*. Paper 20.  
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## The Search for Captain Howdy

1991  
Robert C. Bray

*fade down house lights; spot on podium from above;  
fade up slide of Lorena Bray, left projector:*

I would like to dedicate this to my mother, Lorena Bray.

Maestro, if you please!

*play excerpt from 'the devil came from kansas;' fade up slide of me, right projector: As I start reading next section, fade down slide of Lorena Bray*

In the Procol Harum song, when the devil comes from Kansas he announces:

I teach I'm not a preacher/And I aim to stay that way

which is a good rule and one I've tried to follow. It's not that I'd ever choose to preach rather than teach, just that for a professor of literature it's hard to know which is which, to keep from crossing over or moralizing my subject because I don't know enough about it. Actually, I misquoted the line above, which really goes this way: "Though I teach I'm not a preacher." And here's the rest of the verse: "There's a monkey riding on my back/ Been there for some time/ He says he knows me very well/ But he's no friend of mine." So the devil and I, both from Kansas, have a problem purely teaching. And we both have monkeys on our backs. The devil's is nameless, but mine I call "Captain Howdy," borrowing from yet another song, an utterly forgotten early-70s number by Simon Stokes, who can't even be termed a "one-hit wonder" since "Captain Howdy" wasn't even a hit, just a 45 on a jukebox in a westside Bloomington tavern. Anyway, I've spent many futile fragments of years looking for the record of Captain Howdy, whose very elusiveness has made him-her-it my god of irony, with secondary portfolios in ambivalence and ambiguity. The Captain is the CEO in my personal pantheon—or maybe I should say my personal Pandemonium. I never catch up to him, but once in a while old Buffalo Bob gets close, and when he does Captain Howdy, like a hateful wooden puppet, always says the same thing out of both sides of his smirking, riddling mouth: "On the other hand . . ."

fade down on me (right); up on worm (left)

In the beginning was the worm—two worms, to be exact: one, the mythic Worm Ouroboros, 'the serpent that eateth its own tail;' and the other just an ordinary worm, as in the novice monk's response to his abbot: "I am indeed an execrable worm." The two worms represent books the reading and teaching of which were immensely important to me in the early '70s: E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* and Walter Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*.

I first taught Eddison's magnificent heroic fantasy during my first year at Wesleyan, as part of a survey of the British novel. Now *The Worm Ouroboros* is certainly a British novel, but canonically and generically it didn't belong in the syllabus with, say, Virginia Woolf or D.H. Lawrence, two of Eddison's highbrow contemporaries from the 20s and 30s. *The Worm* was in fact resurrected as part of the huge 60s vogue for J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. I happened to think Eddison the more interesting writer and I remember being amazed both by his baroque style and the power of his vision of eternally circling and spiraling good-and-evil. Perhaps it was ignorant of me to include this book, but I've never regretted the decision: Look at this splendid drawing of the Worm by Bette Ann Hepner ('71), now an art teacher at Evergreen Park High School. She submitted it instead of a paper for her final work in the course. It wasn't that Bette Ann couldn't write: she was an artist; I gave her her druthers, which was the sort of thing 60s teachers did in the 70s.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* was at the heart of a course called Writing and Reasoning which Larry Colter and I taught together. It was part of the freshman-year curriculum revolution of the mid-70s, a two-unit course that, if graduate follow-ups are to be believed, was an entirely-too-tough rite of passage into Liberal Land. Larry and I and the students, over several runs, struggled to develop our critical thinking and writing skills as we centered on the fundamental problem of political philosophy: the individual's relation to the social whole. Talk about Captain Howdyism! I'm here to tell you we never got close on this one, though by the end we finally figured out we hadn't figured it out!

I wonder if any among our students remember Writing and Reasoning that way. How about you, Ann Frank ('82), since gone on to a PhD in English and now trying to 'liberate' your own students in your own way at Elmhurst College? And how about you, Carl Teichman ('80): did we imprison you here for life with that damnable course? Or are you simply waiting for clarification before cashing your ticket out?

*A Canticle for Leibowitz*, an after-the-holocaust science-fiction novel, has no ultimate answer either, the nature of humankind being what it (maybe) is. The novel ends with a starship carrying a last new Noah's ark of folk off the now twice-nuked earth. Included are nuns and a begrudgingly-ordained priest, who carries the sacraments of the Church of New Rome, sacraments that are both necessary for starting over and the necessary evidence that all our rebirths are as flawed as the first. Larry and I, secular humanists and therefore infidels, were always awed by the ending of Miller's novel. As for the students, well, I'd love to ask Carl and Ann and all the many others....

*fade down worm; fade up stars; play after the gold rush*

*fade down stars; as I begin to sing/speak, fade up the two Mississippi slides:*

*railroad station on left, swollen creek on right.*

“Riding on the City of New Orleans, Illinois Central Monday morning rail.” Early in January, 1973, with Paul Bushnell and a passel of students, heading south on the first travel seminar ever to New Orleans. We took the train, sleeping fitfully in the coaches through Illinois, waking up somewhere south of Memphis. I remember standing for hours in the open vestibule of the rear car, watching the passing country and thinking, “this must be Mississippi.” I wanted the trip to be a descent into the heart of Faulknerian darkness, and I looked so hard for forty acres and a mule, for ramshackle poor-white cabins, that I must have missed the ‘real’ Mississippi, which is better reflected in these pictures of hamlet train depots and brown-swollen creeks. Yoknapatapha is a country of the mind. What I should have seen was a different darkness: the blue-black of African-American music. Robert Johnson’s Hazelhurst was on the route, but I was seeing Jefferson instead. I thought I glimpsed Darl Bundren taking a wagon-load to town. “It means three dollars,” I thought I heard him say to Anse. I thought he did, but probably it was just Faulkner’s imagination.

*as I begin speaking next section, fade down two Mississippi slides; fade up bar interior slide right*

The avatars of Captain Howdy were around every next corner in New Orleans. Paul Bushnell taught me to detect the Captain’s presence in the Quarter, the Garden District, across the river in Gretna. Paul was my mentor during that trip, and I have continued to learn American wisdom from him all the years since. But Darryl Pratcher was my chief drinking buddy—there he is now, his back to me as I take the picture in a certain slant of N’Orleans winter light, warmer than Dickinson’s in New England but just as fleeting. Many late afternoons found us, after long hours of walking and talking and reading, in one or another of the French Quarter bars. Not the tourist traps or the nightclubs but just the old corner establishments that have been around for ages and are covered with the historical equivalent of Spanish moss. One of our favorites was the Old Absinthe House, which seemed still to exist as it had for George Washington Cable a century before, when he was looking back another hundred years into Creole Louisiana. Sometimes Beth Evans would join Darryl and me, the three of us at the bar like refugees from a bad Hemingway story. Amidst the palpable continuity of the place, one thing had changed between 1773 and 1973 and fortunately for us: the Old Absinthe House no longer legally serves absinthe, so we stuck to beer or pretended that a gray cloudy licorice Pernod was the same brain-rotting stuff as wormwood. Attitudinizing can be fun and educational.

Darryl went on to become a lawyer and works in Springfield; I see him once or twice a year. Beth briefly taught English in high school, conquered a life-threatening illness, and now works for a publisher in Florida. I’m not sure I’d recognize her if she slid down one of these 16-foot stops; yet we haven’t wholly

been out of touch. Some years ago I received a postcard from her: "I went back to New Orleans," she wrote. "You're right, Bob: absinthe does make the heart grow fonder."

*fade up bluesman slide left; fade down bar slide right*

*slowly fade up burgundy street blues to background level; keep it there as I read the following section*

From my journal, New Orleans, Saturday, January 13, 1973: On Jackson Square: a lone clarinetist playing poignantly to a small crowd. The sounds drift over the breeze, break up against the talk. Other music-makers do folk/blues in huddled groups on the cold damp ground. The same boy walks briskly from front to rear of the Square and back again, head down, radio playing harsh among the natural noises. The 3 o'clock sun warms but the wind sweeps it away. One of the folkies is singing "Like a Rolling Stone." It is not Dylan.

*fade out burgundy street blues*

I saw Robert Johnson that day in New Orleans but didn't recognize him. Where was Paul off to when I needed him most? Paul, patiently imparting and receiving, would have noticed and said: "Look, Bob, there's Robert Johnson—or someone like him." Yes, and I bet you didn't know he was also quite a preacher.

*play preacher's blues*

The subtitle of Johnson's "Preacher's Blues" is "Up jumped the devil." The song is, among other things, a warning to teachers not to say they understand til they understand. What we heard was the last verse. Maybe we didn't catch what Johnson was singing any better than the pedant who had the job of trying to write down the words by listening to the scratchy old 78 masters. This transcriber underlines a couple of lines of text in the last verse, then gives us—what else?—a footnote: "The underlined are phonetically correct, although meaningless."

I can study rain  
oh, oh, drive. oh, oh, drive my blues  
I been studyin' the rain and  
I'm 'on' drive my blues away

Back when Sammye Greer used to wrestle with William Butler Yeats, she taught me never to turn my back on a lyric, but to stare down the snaking line until my eyes teared, which applies to folksong lyrics as surely as to "Among School Children." And thanks to Pamela Muirhead I also know a lot more about studyin' and signifiyin' than I used to—more anyway than our poor transcriber. He can't figure out how Robert Johnson could be "studyin' the rain." When an African-American studies something—and remember it's the black preacher who

leads the call-and-response, what we professors call class discussion—she gets to the bottom of it, right down to moral bedrock. Johnson, the preacher, and his double, the devil that is the blues, studied rain together til they knew it signified the blues—not symbolized, now, but signified. When they learned this they knew also that studyin’ would be the death of one of them: Johnson will drive his blues away. How. ‘Goin’ to the ‘still’ry,” he declares, “stay out there all day.’

*fade out bluesman slide left; as I begin speaking next section, fade up snow graveyard slide fight*

I’ve been told that all American Brays worthy of braying are from Kentucky, but since my dear old dad was as slippery as Captain Howdy himself—everywhere but where I happened to be at the time—I couldn’t ask him and just don’t know. But what with my obsession with the preacher Peter Cartwright—and more recently with the founder of bluegrass music, Bill Monroe—I’ve been studyin’ Kentucky pretty closely. You wouldn’t think there’d be much connection between Mississippi blues and Kentucky, but, like me, you’d be wrong. Bill Monroe’s “high lonesome” is musically close to the blues, though at first they may sound as different as apples and oranges:

*play footprints in the snow*

I don’t have time here to study the sinuosities of this apparently simple song, though I can’t resist wondering why the singer went to see Nellie that day, was it his first visit, why did she go wandering off in the snow, what condition she was in when he found her, and why he blesses that happy day, since the last verse makes it clear that “now she’s up in heaven.” The silly sentimentality of the song is undercut both by the blues of the “high lonesome” and the subversive behavior of the text. A bluegrass masterpiece results. Captain Howdy, how do you do it?

*fade down snow graveyard right; fade up highway sign left*

Robert Johnson once visited Decatur, Illinois, on his way up Highways 51 and 66 to Sweet Home Chicago. In soybean town he played—I kid you not—a square-dance—this was in the late 20s and means that the great Delta bluesman played the musical parent of bluegrass—and probably to an all white audience of Kentuckians gone north. I can’t begin to imagine what the social ambience was, or what the music sounded like, but it’s an event on my list of top ten time-machine trips, maybe number one ahead of Lincoln’s Lost Speech. Johnson probably came on up 51 to catch 66 in Bloomington. If so he went through Clinton, where twenty years later one of the Midwest’s best bluegrass bands was located: the Bray Brothers—Harley, Nate and Francis—playing live week in and out on radio station WHOW:

*play whow station break*

But, wait: all this Braying only gets louder and crazier. One day a guy walks into my office on campus and announces: "I'm Bob Bray." "The hell you say!" I answer. But he was, and so am I. We became friends from this time if not doppelgangers. In those days Bob looked like Michael York playing D'Artagnan in *The Three Musketeers*—all blond hair and blue eyes and dimples when he smiled, which was most of the time. And he was as ready as D'Artagnan to mount his pickup and ride out of Gascony (Wapella) to save the world. Bob was incandescent, even a little scary, about the plight of native Americans and the rape of the land. I tried to teach him what else was there, tried, that is, to give him context, though whether context would moderate or further spur I didn't know. He taught me horses, laughed when I fell off my big gelding Jake into an icy March creek running through his farm. He even made me just once a cowboy, a Sunday when we rounded up strays from his father's herd loose in Weldon Springs. After a couple of years at Wesleyan, Bob went back to farming, as the Indians went back to the reservation. We rarely see one another now. But he and his wife Martha have a daughter, Sarah Bray, who is making it hard to tell the dancer from the dance. My own daughter, Madeleine, watches her on the stage and wonders... And so it goes, Bob, so it goes...

*fade out highway sign left; fade up jerry stone slide right; as I read, fade up canterbury slide left*

Because Jerry Stone long ago recreated the 12th century for me, I can't see a Gothic cathedral or a Romanesque basilica without putting him in the space, and I miss the ancient days when we watched Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* Sundays and shared a classroom Mondays—a place of learning devoted to the proposition that if I climbed the one cottonwood in Wright Morris's Lone Tree, Nebraska, and cupped my hands, I could hail Jerry standing away off east in the western portal of Chartres, and he could holler back across an Atlantic Ocean of time. We thought we could hear each other; we thought we were saying the same thing from different directions. Jerry is the most empathetic person I've had as a friend—but he's also a wonderful thinker. Wesleyan students don't know what thinking is until they've watched Jerry worry an idea for days, weeks, semesters, a lifetime. And the result: a shake of the head, a self-deprecating smile, and "I don't know, I don't know." Neither do I, Jerry, but I feel a lot better not knowing together.

*fade down canterbury jerry stone slides; fade up cathedral interior right*

A warm, muggy night right here in June, 1975, no air-conditioning yet in Presser. I have no idea why a faculty recital a month after graduation. But Dwight Drexler was playing Debussy's "Preludes", not to be missed. I went with Spencer Sauter, so the evening was amplified by friendship. Now the tentative, probing first chords of "La Cathedral Engloutie" emerge—the "Sunken Cathedral," spectral image of a legendary church rising like Mont St.-Michel from the

sea, once every millennium, glimpsed by faithful and skeptic alike, then subsiding slowly back and gone. A thousand years take six minutes. At the fully risen moment, the cathedral's bells ring out across water and land:

*play cathedral engloutie*

I remember white knuckles, wanting to shout not clap, inner voice saying over and over, "I see, I see!" Spencer remembers, awesome. Dwight remembers a recital like any other.

*fade down cathedral interior; as I begin to speak this section, fade up slide of empty tomb left*

*fade up circle unbroken to background level and keep it there all during this section; raise volume for first chorus, then fade out*

Riding back from Springfield one afternoon with Angie Hill; desultory conversation. Angie, did you know that Christian graves are always laid out east-west? Well, maybe not all and always but all of them I've seen...Look at that cemetery over there...We're heading north...see how they all line up eastward. Why is that, Angie? What's going on? Is it so the bodies will be going up when the last trump sounds, like something in a Michael Jackson video?... No? Maybe all those rectangular graves square the circle so it won't be broken....

Will the circle be unbroken/ By and by, Lord, by and by?

Is that a question, Angie?

There's a better home awaiting/ In the sky, Lord, in the sky.

Is that an answer? The folk seem pretty positive on slim evidence. Will that sky then be like Stevens's sky, "not this dividing and indifferent blue"? Can you help me with this one, Angie? Can you?

*fade down empty tomb left*

So, after all, students make the best Captain Howdys. You try to trick them and they signify on you. Last year about this time I thought I'd joke my American Renaissance class by giving them an absurd extra-credit question on their take-home final: Recite from memory Walt Whitman's poem, "This Compost" at Operation Recycle headquarters. Hand in tape and witness' affidavit for verification. I called this extra credit—ha, ha—brown-nose points and offered an A+ in the course to anyone who could do it, thinking no one could or would. I should have known better. Howdy, Captain Howdy, you've been sitting in the front row all semester, under the alias of Kim Hefner.



*fade up A+ slide right*

Besides the requisite Howdyish grin, you've got a case of softball catcher's knees, meaning you like to stretch out your aching legs, lean back in your seat, chin in hand, from which position sooner or later in the hour you come out with an "on the other hand." Of course you'd try this crazy thing; of course you'd hand in a tape just minutes before the deadline. You dared, Kim, you did it; now listen to yourself; listen with especial care to the line you left out—and bless or curse your own Captain Howdy.

*play kim reciting this compost; as she reads, slowly fade out A+, leaving both sides of screen blank; house lights up at end, when tape says "good job."*